A Review
by Gary Grant

Nineteenth-Century Brick Architecture in the Roanoke Valley and Beyond: Discovering the True Legacies of the Deyerle Builders; Michael J. Pulice; Kegley Publications of the Historical Society of Western Virginia; 2011.

It's not your typical whodunit. Actually, more of a who-built-it, this "detective" yarn of sorts comes complete with the fingerprints of a cast of "suspects" all in the family, right down to some of the servants . . . in this case, the slaves. These aren't the denizens of some great English country house, but rather several generations of skilled Virginia artisans who, without fanfare but with obvious pride, crafted principally in bricks and mortar some of the most cherished landmarks of the Roanoke Valley and a bit beyond.

More than a decade of sleuthing by Michael J. Pulice, an architectural historian with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources at its western Virginia office in Salem, now has unmasked, more or less definitively, the legacy of the Deyerles. The stuff of the Deyerle "legend," now mythic in the region, began in 1934 when an elderly retired minister, formerly a slave-builder before the Civil War, jogged the Deyerles' collective memory with his boyhood recollections of their ancestors' unsung prowess as erstwhile builders and brick-makers.

That former slave, Peyton M. Lewis, pretty-much single-handedly launched, however unwittingly, the reputation of his owner Benjamin Deyerle as the beau ideal of mid-19th-century itinerant contractor-architects, hailed by the middle of the 20th century as the "foremost builder in the Roanoke Valley."

Mike Pulice wanted, however, to uncover more than the lore.

If the family legend began with its premier practitioner, Benjamin Deyerle, Pulice became convinced that the story didn't end there. This architectural detective resolved to track down unsubstantiated tales and vague circumstantial evidence that also implicated one of Benjamin's brothers, plus a half-brother and a nephew, in a family "dynasty" of expert backcountry builders and masons. In succession for nearly a century, they molded and fired millions of bricks, using them to impress numerous clients with their bricklaying skills.

Buoyed by an early stint as an archeologist, and bolstered by an ability to navigate architectural history as if it were "forensic science," this tireless researcher sifted through mountains of additional clues to connect the dots of the entire Deyerle builder dynasty, spanning generations across the 19th century. Far from a superficial catalog of the "venerable plantations of illustrious families whose ancestors I have envied," *Discovering the True Legacies of the Deyerle Builders* instead relates the untold story in bricks and mortar—supported by pictures old and recent, maps

and site plans, diagrams and charts—of one family's lasting impact on the Roanoke Valley, from the time of their arrival here in the mid-18th century by way of the Great Valley Road. In just under 200 pages, lavishly-illustrated and painstakingly annotated, *True Legacies* chronicles with scores of still-tangible examples the contributions of these industrious settlers of German descent, and that of several slave-builders.

Anyone who plies the streets and highways in and around Roanoke, Salem, Blacksburg, and Christiansburg passes frequently at least some of the landmarks that testify to the Deyerles' skill and integrity. Benjamin Deyerle's homestead, "Lone Oak," as well as his "Belle Air," and "Buena Vista," remain important touchstones anchoring neighborhoods around the Star City. His brother David's "Monterey," also in Roanoke, evokes the Deep South, and his Christiansburg Presbyterian Church ranks among the quintessential Greek Revival edifices in the area, rivaling the related, much-celebrated Salem Presbyterian, built by Joseph and son J(ames) C. Deyerle, his half-brother and nephew, respectively. The much-altered former Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, long adapted as restaurant, survives near the university bearing ancient witness to David Deyerle's talents. His superlative brickwork survives intact in the massive Main Building at Hollins, while Joseph and J.C., as he was known, left their mark on the Main (Administration) Building at Roanoke College. Years later, at the college's Bittle Memorial Hall, J.C. executed brickwork in earnest neo-Gothic style. Also near Salem, Joseph Deyerle's own dwelling, "Pleasant Grove," and its dependencies, are a *tour de force* of his skills in brick masonry.

To put these builders in context, the author includes a family tree of selected "begats" of all the Roanoke Valley Deyerle generations spanning a century and half, beginning in the 18th century with Peter Deyerle (1732-1812). Following the Great Valley Road, this German immigrant settled eventually in a log house he built himself on the forks of the Roanoke River west of Salem. This family patriarch and at least one of three sons, Charles (Sr.), operated grist mills in the area. While not carpenters or masons, per se, these millers possessed skills sufficient not only to sustain these operations, but also to have built them with their own hands.

One of Peter's grandsons, Joseph Deyerle (1799-1877), was the first in the family to leave a significant mark in the building trades—notably at what is now the main administrative building (1847) at Roanoke College. His son J.C. (1825-1897) followed in his father's footsteps. As the 19th century wore on, the genetic predisposition to building, especially in brick, continued to manifest itself in other Deyerle men. These included David (1813-1898) and the only acknowledged architect of the lot, the celebrated Benjamin (1806-1883).

This Deyerle quartet—Joseph and son J.C., plus half-brothers Benjamin and David, are the focus of this book, both as builders and for their production of the bricks they made and used in their trade. Seated in the Roanoke Valley, the Deyerle builders' geographic footprint spills over into the counties of Botetourt, Montgomery, Franklin, and even Pulaski, where the author's dogged pursuit of leads turned up another tantalizing suspect in the saga.

In setting the stage for his analysis of their work in bricks and mortar, the author sketches the "cast" of characters, with emphasis on the Deyerle builders, in neat monographs, fleshing out each of these craftsmen and their families with obvious affection, drawing from anecdote and many original sources. Describing, for example, one of the lesser-known, but most accomplished, of the builder dynasty, David Deyerle, Pulice reserves highest praise, perhaps, for a seasoned craftsman when he notes, "Then 68 or 69 years old (about the time Big Lick became Roanoke), he was likely in good repair for his age."

In his quest for the Deyerle's True Legacies, Pulice then explores the arcane, finer points of 19th-century antebellum construction in brick—how the clay was prepared, and with what additives prior to being molded into various shapes and sizes. Then, after the bricks dried, he follows how the they were fired and transported, ready to be laid up into walls—using which time-honored bond and what mortar. Finally, he explains how the joints, and perhaps even the bricks themselves, were finished.

This slim chapter, "Brick Masonry," covers all aspects of how bricks were produced before mechanization, and relates that technology to early construction techniques. This section, sandwiched between the intriguing Deyerle biographies and an expansive catalog of their buildings, extant and lost, is the "mortar" which holds together the "bricks" that make *True Legacies* such a valuable resource.

The author's careful analysis of traditional brick masonry is the point on which his investigation of the Deyerles turns. Here too, Pulice unravels the mysteries of making and firing bricks the old way, and continues by exploring the structural qualities of traditional brick bonds—Flemish, stretcher and common (often known as American, we learn, in its five-course form), to name some generic types.

It is almost exclusively from the author's intensive study of the Deyerles' characteristic brickwork that the tangible legacy of David Deyerle has been revealed at last, decades after the reputation of his older brother Benjamin was sealed for posterity.

It's an unexpected crash course for those of us unfamiliar with exactly how the world worked until the machine age swept away time-honored hand labor.

True Legacies culminates in a handsome pictorial catalog of known and suspected examples of work by the Deyerle builders, illuminating each not only as exponents of their time and place, but showcasing as well certain idiosyncrasies, preferences and techniques that betray a given building and its brick masonry as uniquely Deyerle.

Exemplary are Benjamin Deyerle's grand late-antebellum houses that have become, at least in the popular imagination, pretty much synonymous with the Deyerle "style." To illustrate characteristics common to Benjamin Deyerle's building repertoire, Pulice analyzes five of these mansions. Most in the Roanoke-Salem axis survive—Belle Aire, Buena Vista, Lone Oak and White Corners, with one loss—Intervale. Beyond obviously similar morphology—each two-stories, with interior end chimneys, and a hipped roofline above a three-bay facade with windows emphasized by massive lintels—it is their robust corner pilasters and entablature of parged brick that ally them unmistakably with Benjamin Deyerle, and render them pretty much without precedent in antebellum southwest Virginia.

Only Salem's now-lost house Intervale did not share with its survivors a facade of stretcher bond, so fashionable for mid-19th-century houses in the Greek taste. In fact, this architect-builder had a knack, as did his brother David, for making a good first impression without the visual "clutter" of headers in the facade. As the Civil War loomed, the stretch-bond facade was favored increasingly over old-fashioned header-stretcher (Flemish) techniques because it yielded a smooth-surfaced, monolithic appearance that reinforced the serenity of Greek Revival style. Achieving this seamless effect without the use of visible headers, the author avers, was much trickier than one imagines. Producing a convincing stretcher bond wall, sort of like sleight of hand, tested the mettle of even a really good mason. Solutions to this problem of structural integrity ranged from laying up parts of the wall with bricks that either were squares, L-shaped, or split cleverly to hold mortar just where it would serve to bond to its neighbors most effectively.

According to Pulice, a hallmark of both Benjamin and David Deyerle was their routine use of up to three different bonds in one building. The location for each type related directly to the prominence of the elevation. Stretcher bond was reserved for the facade; a variation of Flemish bond on both ends and common bond at the rear elevation. This "three-tiered hierarchy" of brick bonds was almost unique to work by these brothers.

With pictures and clear prose, Pulice brings the reader along as well in following the importance of how Deyerle bricks were shaped. Benjamin Deyerle molded virtually all his bricks with underside indentations, often called "frogs." Here, especially, the author's detective work, proves definitive. Having looked at many examples from numerous sites, he notes that "the very presence or absence of frog bricks was an important clue in identifying the works of individual Deyerles." David's rather larger bricks never featured such indentions, nor did bricks from Joseph's and son J.C.'s operations. In their brickwork, this father and son remained loyal, unlike Benjamin and David, to the tried-and-true five-course Flemish bond facade, with four-course common bond on other elevations.

Judging from his research and careful measurements of bricks from site to site, Pulice concludes that most all bricks of Deyerle manufacture were sized generously. Those made and used by

David Deyerle were especially large, often tempered with quantities of slag, the by-product of iron-smelting.

A number of other hallmarks, the author concludes, elevate Deyerle bricks and brick-making above those of their contemporaries. On every job these builders made and used high-quality sand-molded brick; this consistency prevailed also in their insistence on uniform bond intervals throughout a building. Without exception too their commissions were finished with mortar joints of just one type, known as the Overhand Struck Joint, which was popular at the time. To that finish they added white pencilling. Overall, the Deyerles and their slaves generally exceeded their regional contemporaries in every way, according to Pulice, "in terms of neatness and fine joinery."

Pulice cautions that associating one family member or another with a particular project need not rely on these "fingerprints" of Deyerle construction alone. Rather, a Deyerle connection to a project often can be inferred rather accurately by factoring in the builder's physical proximity to the building site. As long as horse and wagon were the main conveyances, transporting brick and workers any distance was difficult at best.

Discovering the True Legacies of the Deyerle Builders is just that, an architectural discovery for the layman, or the academic; it's part reference and spiffy enough for the coffee table. Mr. Pulice's method of getting to the point, not unlike an autopsy, dissects the very sinew of the Deyerles' body of work, the very bricks and mortar that are the tell-tale evidence of calloused hands in scores of houses and a handful of churches and public buildings. Employing this method, Mr. Pulice debunks, gently, romantic twaddle in favor of something more enduring. Following as it does one family of builders in one locale over several generations, *True Legacies* is quite a journey. It burnishes the Deyerle legacies just as promised.

Reviewer Gary Grant is a preservationist in Danville, Virginia, and is a former chairman of the Virginia State Review Board for the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places.